

## Planning around a Theme

Many teachers find it useful to organize activities around a theme or topic that interests their children. A theme-based classroom exposes and re-exposes young learners to new ideas and vocabulary in a concentrated way, and gives them plenty of time to get comfortable with, make sense of, and own new ideas and words. While planning to use themes in classrooms, teachers should also think about how each theme will be used to support the instructional goals.

For example, if the class theme is "the ocean," a teacher might lead the following activities:

- Read aloud from books about the ocean, emphasizing theme-based rare words and encouraging children to share any ocean-related knowledge or questions they may have. Remember to use words that are important to understanding the story. Use child-friendly definitions when emphasizing the new words. Relate the meaning to prior experiences and knowledge the children may have.
- Have children pick at random from a collection of plastic sea creatures or cards with pictures of sea creatures on them. Prompt children to name their creatures and compare and contrast them with their classmates' creatures. ("Jacob's starfish has five arms. Eliza, how many arms does your octopus have? What else do you notice about your sea creature?")
- Ask children about their experiences at the beach, in boats, when fishing, or at the aquarium. Prompt children to extend their responses beyond short answers. Additional questions may be used to encourage children to continue talking.
- Bring the ocean into the classroom: provide a fish in a tank as a class pet. Have the children name the fish. Encourage discussion about the fish by telling them about it—what it's called, how it breathes, etc. Then invite children to ask questions and make observations.

Although theme-based instruction is a great way to introduce new ideas and vocabulary in authentic ways and provides a built-in context for children's talk, it is not the only way to do so. Rich themes and activities designed around those themes work very well, as long as children's interest is maintained.

After putting many hours into planning, it may be hard for a teacher to stay flexible. But if children show a lack of interest in a theme from the beginning, or if their interest wanes after a day or two, it is okay to take instruction in a different direction. In situations like these, it is perfectly acceptable to lead a story retell that has worked well in the past or fall back on some favorite activities. But it's often best to let children's interests point the way; if a child keeps pulling an unread copy of *Planes, Trains, Cars and More!* off the shelf, give it a read. It might lead to a new class theme: transportation.

Regardless of the theme you choose to create a context, prompt children to speak using broad, open-ended questions that spark their imaginations, get them to think creatively, and compel them to speak in rich and descriptive ways.

### **Making New Vocabulary Stick**

One of the primary reasons that organizing classroom activities around a theme is useful is that it enables teachers to introduce children to groups of related vocabulary words (both ordinary root words and rare unusual words) within a meaningful context. Because the classroom itself is devoted to supporting and sustaining that context, the teacher has opportunities to expose children to new words and ideas repeatedly, within small windows of time, to ensure that children are building an understanding of new vocabulary words and an idea of how to use them.

Read alouds (both theme-based and not) also provide an instant context for new words. When presenting new words, one should always provide children additional support in the form of images or objects. The word pinecone becomes much more meaningful when a child is given one to hold and talk about.

When rare words are introduced, prompt children to use them, both through open-ended questioning and by providing activities that are designed to get rare words flowing. The repeated use of new vocabulary is key to ensuring that children retain what they've learned, but repetition should be a natural part of organized play, not just rote memorization.